

# **Re-envisioning Iran Online: Photoblogs and the Ethnographic 'Digital-Visual moment'**

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## **Abstract**

Digital photography and the Internet play important roles in contemporary cultures. They can create semiotic spaces in which 'local' imaginaries are projected in 'global' frames and cultural representations can be collectively challenged. This article discusses the genre of popular photography and its convergence with the Iranian social web in the form of photoblogs (photography-oriented blogs). It describes how everyday images posted on photoblogs playfully move beyond representative tropes, which constitute a visual legacy in contemporary Iran. The findings provide insights into contemporary Iranian online visual-cultural production and develop wider theoretical understandings of digital photography's social uses, including notions of 'everyday aesthetics'. The ways in which Iranian photobloggers select, curate, exhibit and manipulate personal digital photographs on their photoblogs are shown to be exemplary of a contemporary ethnographic 'digital-visual moment' of popular cultural storytelling, existing at the interface of local and global, as well as actual and virtual publics.

## **Keywords**

Contemporary Iran, digital-visual culture, visual representations, photoblogs, everyday aesthetics

## **Introduction**

Internet-based digital photography plays a prominent role in societies across the globe. Anthropologists are increasingly concerned with how 'global' technologies link to 'local' politics of visual self-representation (Glowczewski 2005; Brown 2007; Underberg and Zorn 2013; Vivienne and Burgess 2013; Were 2013). In the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the Internet is monitored in accordance with the regime's political and cultural values, popular picture-taking, in conjunction with online social networks, presents a notable form of middle-class expression for the 30 percent of the population that uses the Internet. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter,

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YouTube, Flickr and Instagram are banned and connection speeds are notoriously slow. Despite these conditions, individuals effectively use the Internet on their own terms. Blocks and filters are circumvented via the use of VPN (Virtual Private Network) connections, which simulate Internet connections from a location outside of Iran, and ‘anonymity networks’ such as TOR (The Online Router) are used; TOR is a free software programme that conceals users’ locations and protects them from traffic analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Popular or amateur photography in the Internet era in Iran (mid-1990s onwards) has undergone a series of socio-technological transformations that have both enabled and constrained its usage. The advent of the mobile phone camera in the early 2000s popularised everyday picture taking in Iran, as elsewhere in the world (Okabe and Ito 2003; Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012; Berry and Schleser 2014). One prominent photoblogger, the publicly anonymous creator of the ‘Life Goes on in Tehran’ photoblog (LGOIT), described the social significance of using a mobile phone to document everyday life:

Just the fact that I was taking my phone everywhere with me made it the ideal choice in Iran. Who wants to walk around Tehran with a heavy professional-grade camera around their neck? I chose to use my mobile phone for the freedom of mobility I had with it and also, people didn’t seem to mind some dude taking photos with his phone--they would assume it’s for personal use and wouldn’t question it (LGOIT interview, March 2012).

Here, LGOIT suggests both a general appeal of mobile phone photography, which allows greater ‘freedom of mobility’, as well as a specific appeal in Iran under the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013). In a climate of hardline conservatism, which followed an earlier period of reformism under President Khatami (1997-2005), people might not, as LGOIT perceived at the time, ‘question’ having their pictures taken in public as much, if it was done discreetly on a camera phone.

The June 2009 protests against the re-election of Ahmadinejad as President radically altered public attitudes towards popular photography. Headed by the new reformist Green Movement, people took to the streets to rally against what they deemed to be an unjust election result. In the absence of independent media and a

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<sup>2</sup> On the history, development and uses of the Internet in Iran see Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) and Akhavan (2013).

heavy crackdown on foreign journalism in the country, mobile phones, in conjunction with the Internet, became crucial to communicate live events across the globe (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Khosronejad 2011; Khatib 2013; Khosronejad 2013). In Iran and elsewhere this marked a new phase of citizen journalism facilitated by mobile and social media. The 2009 protests resulted in an increased visibility of Iran's new media usage as well as increased government control over them (Morozov 2009; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Service to mobile phones, now considered tools of resistance, was interrupted and usage was monitored accordingly. In 2009, it was even rumoured that the regime was thinking about banning the use of phones with cameras altogether (LGOIT Interview, March 2012).

Beyond social media-facilitated activism however, broader socio-cultural uses of popular photography are taking place on what Akhavan (2013) calls the 'Iranian Internet', and these uses warrant further ethnographic attention. In this article, I introduce the case of Iranian photoblogs as one uncharted area of ethnographic investigation, wherein a nascent form of digital storytelling (Lambert 2002) with photographs aims to re-sculpt the international image of Iran 'from below'. Based on digital-ethnographic fieldwork with Iranian photobloggers, inside and outside of Iran, I examine this social practice and discuss its emergence and the reasons it has become a popular choice of Iranian visual-cultural expression over the past decade. The popularity of the practice is explained by way of the digital technologies to hand (which has increased the amount of visual information being produced by ordinary citizens), and by the contested legacy of image-making in post-1979 Iranian identity politics. The synthesis of these aspects amongst a historically-aware generation growing up with the Internet as part of their daily lives accounts for what I suggest is the present ethnographic 'digital-visual moment' of cultural self-representation witnessed in Iranian photoblogs.

### **Introducing Iranian photoblogs**

The term photoblog denotes blogs centred on the regular posting of photographs. Individuals set up photoblogs parallel to their Flickr, Facebook or Instagram accounts (though they often also link them up to these), in order to create a stand-alone digital space for the purpose of what Van House (2007) calls (in the context of Flickr) 'photo exhibition'. Photoblogs are both related to and distinctive from text-based blogs. The latter may contain photographs and the former invariably

includes written text in captions and comments. However, photoblogs clearly privilege the visual as their principal method of communication. What makes the photoblog distinct from other websites is its particular temporality, predicated on regular (or even constant) posting of new material. The most recent photographic blog entry appears at the top of the page or is placed in the latest month's archive of that year (see figure 1). A photoblogger named Vahid explained how photoblogging is 'about keeping it live; you have to keep uploading and keep updating it, everyday' (Vahid Rahmanian interview, May 2013). This temporal aspect effectively forms a kind of photographic diary of the individual's daily life in Iran, which is then shared online as a visual record of Iran in the 'here and now'. It is this aspect of being a 'live,' and constantly updated account of the 'truth' of Iran at a particular moment in time, which constitutes the major part of the photoblog's textured ethnographic and paradoxical appeal for viewers.

Iranian photoblogging emerged in the mid 2000s along with the popularity of Flickr and in a context where text-based blogging was experiencing exponential growth as a new form of expression-- what Sreberny and Khiabany (2010:59) have called 'politics by other means'.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Individuals set up photoblogs at this time (using either existing platforms or via their chosen web host), suggests that there were certain aspects of lived experience that warranted specifically visual communication. In his aptly titled photoblog, 'Words Are Never Enough', Saleh Ara, an Iranian male student photoblogger in his late twenties, explains the following:

Since here in Iran flickr.com and other photography-related sites have been banned, I started my own photoblog in June 2005 in order to share my photos as an amateur photographer.<sup>4</sup>

Photoblogging is mostly undertaken by middle-class Iranian men and women in their mid to late twenties and early thirties, living inside and outside of the country. They take photographs of scenes from everyday life in Iran on mobile phone and digital SLR cameras. Those living in Iran typically reside in large cities, though they often travel, sometimes in groups, across other regions of Iran to document "life as lived" across the country. Belonging to a specific economic and social milieu, Iranian

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<sup>3</sup> For more information regarding the emergence of the practice, see the digital research exhibition co-curated with participant photobloggers as part of my PhD project: [www.photoblogsiran.com](http://www.photoblogsiran.com)

<sup>4</sup> See his photoblog: <http://www.8pmdaily.com/index.php?x=about>



photobloggers are well acquainted with ‘global’ cultures, trends and aesthetics. In connection with their intended global viewership, a majority of the text written on photoblogs is in English. Comments by viewers reflect a mixture of English, Persian and a hybrid form, informally known as ‘PEnglish’: Persian speech expressed in the English alphabet. Photobloggers also link up their photoblogs to photoblog community pages such as [coolphotoblogs.com/iran](http://coolphotoblogs.com/iran), [aminus3.com/country/ir-iran](http://aminus3.com/country/ir-iran), or on Iran-specific pages such as [photoblogs.ir](http://photoblogs.ir) (no longer active).

In this article, I focus on two photoblogs of eminent photobloggers—one living inside Iran, the other outside. Select images are discussed along with corresponding interview material, all of which form part of a wider digital ethnography of the Iranian photoblogosphere<sup>5</sup> in the period from 2012 to 2014. The first is the publicly anonymous photographer behind the photoblog Life Goes on in Tehran<sup>6</sup>, or LGOIT<sup>7</sup> (figure 1) who grew up in Iran but now lives abroad. LGOIT’s sense of ‘otherness’ to Iran is something consciously acknowledged as part of his/her particular self-positioning: ‘I was always an outsider looking in or an insider looking out and could have the perspective of an “other” to spice up my comments and present a more complete picture of life in Tehran’. LGOIT’s self-aware sense of an objective view of Iranian culture recalls Viveiros de Castro’s (2004) ‘perspectivism,’ which also lends itself to the kind of cross-cultural imagining photobloggers intend their photoblogs to perform. The second case study, Amir Sadeghi, creator of the Tehran Live<sup>8</sup> photoblog (figure 2) was born and continues to live in Iran. He has been posting daily snapshots from the country’s capital since 2006. In contrast to LGOIT’s ‘in-betweenness’, Amir explained his photoblog as a vehicle to export an insider’s view of Iran to a wider global public. Citing a collective ‘we’ to denote the average Iranian citizen, Amir describes his photoblog as a ‘sign... for everyone who thinks we don’t live peacefully’. Like many Iranian photobloggers, he considers his practice to be a duty to represent the “real” Iran from within and ‘from below’.

The two case studies indicate how there is no set ‘type’ of Iranian photoblogger, photoblog or viewer response. One strategy for investigating their respective creative

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<sup>5</sup> I coined the term the ‘photoblogosphere’ in my PhD thesis. It conceptualises the multiple spaces, on and offline, in and outside Iran, where photobloggers and viewers partake in the practice.

<sup>6</sup> The photoblog [www.lifegoesonintehran.com](http://www.lifegoesonintehran.com) was ‘live’ between April 2007 and August 2010. Today, it is continued through its Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/lgoit>

<sup>7</sup> I use the acronym LGOIT to describe both the photoblog and the photographer.

<sup>8</sup> [www.tehranlive.org](http://www.tehranlive.org) was established in November 2006 and continues to be updated on a monthly basis.

agencies however can be located in the position of the individuals vis-à-vis their practices, following Harris' (2006:698) suggestion that 'location remains a powerful tool for contextualising the creative process as embodied experience'. Either as cultural 'in-betweeners' travelling frequently in and out of the country, or as fully-fledged 'insiders', both types of visual-narrative voice appear to hold sway for their various audiences. For some Iranian viewers of LGOIT, the element of cultural 'in-betweenness' that the photoblogger professes to offer, appears to be important in assessing his/her authorial 'authority' to visually represent Iran and Iranian culture:

I really like your outsider look of Tehran. I guess that's a capability to detach ourselves from our current situation and look from outside...in this regard you can find many things which you might not pay attention to, but are a part of our daily life.<sup>9</sup>

Iranian viewers of 'Tehran Live' also convey an appreciation for Amir's 'authentic' efforts at salvaging the image of Iran from within: 'This site is so profound and surely from this good work, people can understand how Tehran is not simply all about war and bad people....'<sup>10</sup> Non-Iranian viewers express gratitude for the existence of photoblogs, but for different reasons; as alternative news sources, or accessible venues from which to garner cultural information about the country's diversity: 'Your blog is such a great piece of information! I discovered it due to the election conflicts, but I am enjoying looking at all your pictures throughout the years...it really opens my eyes to your culture. Thank you.'<sup>11</sup> As will be shown throughout the article, the global appeal of photoblogs lie in their being both a subjective *and* 'truthful' representation of Iran, grounded in ethno-biographical experience, as opposed to political and ideological hyperbole.

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<sup>9</sup> Viewer comment on LGOIT Facebook fan page, posted 3 August 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Viewer comment, *Tehran Live*, posted 31 May 2008 translated from the Persian by the author. The original comment is posted in Persian, written in the English alphabet.

<sup>11</sup> Viewer comment, *Tehran Live*, posted 16 June 2009.

## LIFE GOES ON IN TEHRAN

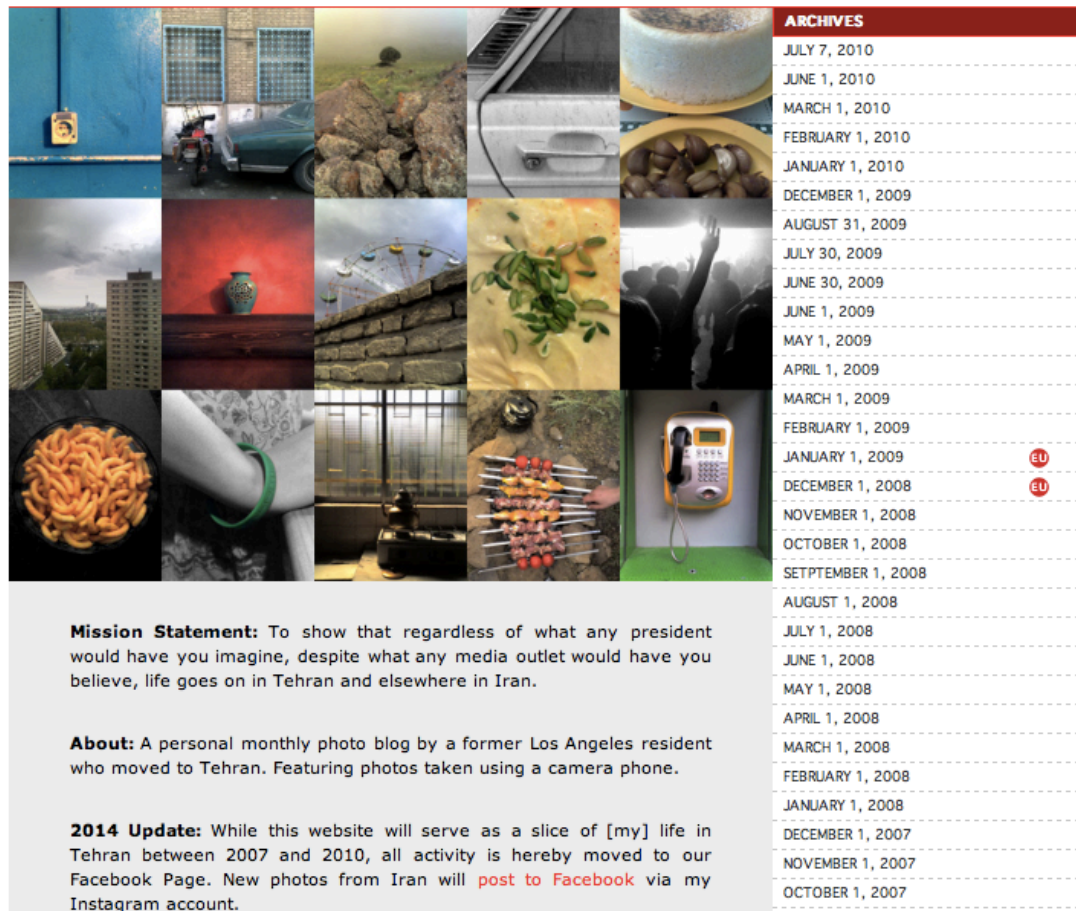


Figure 1

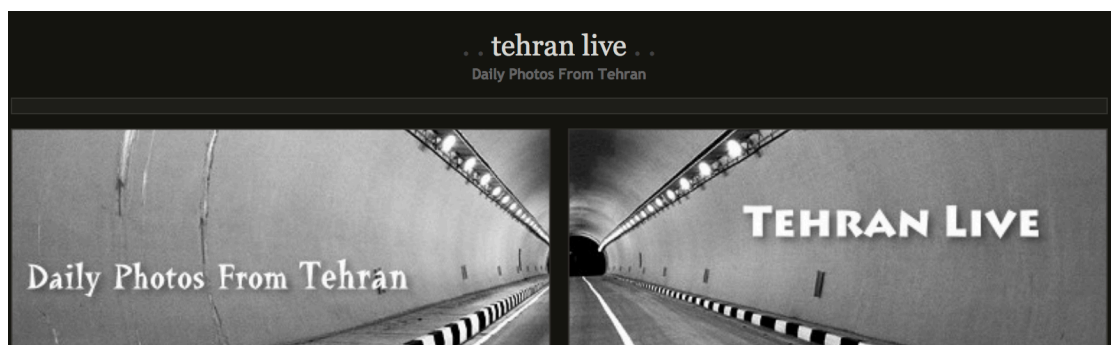


Figure 2

## Visual legacies in Contemporary Iran

In order to assess the socio-cultural salience of photoblogs, it is important to understand the historical context in which the making and viewing of images and image 'types' in and *about* Iran are situated. From the inception of the Islamic Republic, following the 1979 Revolution, state ideology has (and continues to be)

disseminated through a broad range of visual means, from state media broadcasting through IRIB (The Islamic Republic of Iran's domestic media corporation which holds the monopoly over local television and radio) to street art, postage stamps, documentary and fiction films, photography exhibitions, museums, cemeteries and urban public spaces (Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000; Balaghi and Gumpert 2002; Varzi 2006; Khosronejad 2012; Khatib 2013). Wall murals commemorating martyrs of the Revolution (1979) and Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) have become a visual characteristic of Iran's major cities (Marzolph 2003; Gruber 2008; Karimi 2008; Fromanger 2012) and Iranian state actors are increasingly employing government-sponsored websites and social networks to pursue 'top-down' cultural production online (Akhavan 2013). Combined with elements of Shii aesthetic tradition, these visual representations stake heavy ideological claims on notions of Iranian national identity.

Figure 3 shows a government-sponsored poster plastered on a wall in *Valiasr* Square in October 2013, photographed by Amir and posted on Tehran Live. Created by political hardliners as anti-American propaganda, the mural depicts President Barack Obama standing beside an ancient military commander Shemr, known in Shiite tradition as the villain responsible for the killing of Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala (10<sup>th</sup> October A.D. 680). The banner reads in Persian, *Ba Ma Bash, Dar Aman Bash*, 'Be With Us and Be Safe'. Interpreting the image for his viewers, Amir explained how the phonetic coupling of 'ba' with 'ma' constitutes a deliberate word play on Obama's name, whilst the pairing of Shemr with a modern day Hussein (Barack Hussein Obama) sends a symbolic message to Iranians that anyone who trusts Obama can be considered a traitor, an enemy of the Shia and, by extension, of Iran. Put up one month before 'Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) and Shii day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the mural references a particular set of historic, symbolic tropes that are well known to the average Iranian viewer.<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary context of tight international sanctions on Iran and increasing pressure from the EU and International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) pressure for the regime's compliance on matters relating

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<sup>12</sup> References to Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein have been (and continue to be) symbolically used in popular and official Iranian visual representations of 'just' struggles against perceived enemies, from the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) to the election protests of 2009 and beyond. See Chelkowski and Dabashi (2000), Fischer (2003), Khosronejad (2013) and Akhavan (2013).

to its nuclear programme, this anti-American propaganda is clearly intended for domestic visual consumption.



Figure 3

By posting this image on his photoblog however, Amir modifies its materiality and its public nature. The original billboard is transformed into a digital form, which marks the beginning of the image's 'cultural biography' (Kopytoff 1986) or (virtual) 'social life' (Appadurai 1986). In light of the caption provided by the photoblogger, the isolationist message of the billboard and its anti-American sentiment becomes the site of a virtual public message board, open to contestation and critique for a broader viewing public (but also one that

remains defined by, and confined to, its online venue). This new public now includes those outside of Iran (both exiled/expat Iranians and foreigners) seeking to re-think ideological divisions between Iran and the west.

One viewer remarked: ‘I saw this banner, but since it’s written in Persian, I couldn’t understand the message’<sup>13</sup>. Through his intervention as cultural interlocutor, Amir translates layers of meaning between offline Iranian visual culture and his online viewing public. Comments by non-Iranian viewers from across the world generally convey a sense of solidarity with these attempts to extend and mediate daily life in Tehran (and more broadly across Iran) to the rest of the world. As one American viewer exclaimed: ‘You post such good pictures, thank you...I truly enjoy knowing your people are just the same as us. In fact, you are more like us than many of the countries we consider “friendly!”’<sup>14</sup> Such comments are, naturally, only made possible by the image’s new virtual venue (its move or re-materialization in the above example from a public urban space to a global virtual space). The fact that a local photographic practice can suitably ‘mediate modernity’ (Pinney 2003: 202) in this way, is what arguably confers on the Iranian photoblog its status as a modern Iranian digital vernacular in contemporary global cultural politics.

Image-making and distribution through the Internet forms part of a wider process of Iranian society’s textured social and visual-cultural negotiation with the state (Akhavan 2013; Scheiwiller 2013; Sreberny and Torfeh 2013). Socially-conscious digital photographic practices form a salient part of this thriving popular cultural critique (Reshid and Araghi 2008). It is within this burgeoning urban subcultural milieu, largely defined along generational lines and access to global cultural flows, that we ought to partially situate photoblogs. At the same time, Iranian photobloggers’ visual practices also move beyond their national context. They enter into dialogue with broader facets of post-1979 Iranian visual history circulating in the global ‘mediascape’ that claim to represent what Iran (or ‘Iranianness’) is. Events since the Revolution, including the Iran hostage crisis, (1979-1981), Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and 9/11 have fuelled waves of international anxiety and xenophobia

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<sup>13</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 26/10/13.

<sup>14</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 31/07/12.



concentrated on the imagined ‘Muslim other’ (Said 1981). Iranians and Muslims across the world have found themselves summarily associated with labels such as ‘Islamic extremism’ and the ‘threat of terrorism’ (Mcauliffe 2007). Such ideas are grounded in the perceived ‘anti-modernity’ of Islam as well as Iran’s ‘medieval’ post-revolutionary political, legal and cultural frameworks. Today, questions surrounding the country’s nuclear capabilities, its poor human rights record and imposition of economic sanctions continue to render it an international pariah state. Mass media representations, news journalism and Hollywood films all contribute to a global cultural climate in which negative and overtly politicized portrayals of Iran continue to thrive. Not only do these narratives preclude awareness of the complexities of life inside the country, but they also stake a heavy ideological claim on the sense of ‘local’ cultural identity and belonging of Iranians around the world. Photobloggers develop their practice amidst these internal *and* external visual legacies. As LGOIT puts it:

I felt that I had to cancel out, or rather balance out, two flawed approaches in depictions of Iran and Iranians. One narrative was that of a lazy Western media who created a false illusion of Iran as an enemy state. The other was that of the image the Islamic Republic projected of the country, which similarly suggested all Iranians were extremist Muslims who gather around every Friday to chant ‘Death to America’ and ‘Death to Israel’. Something had to be done about this (LGOIT interview, March 2012).

Vast generalizations and negative portrayals of the west also characterize much of the way the Islamic Republic politically and visually consolidates its own image, both politically and visually, through othering. First advocated by the early Islamic ideologues and put to work in Ayatollah Khomeini’s ‘cultural Islamization’ project throughout the 1980’s (Varzi 2006), a zealous kind of ‘nativism’, rooted in a political and cultural aversion to the west, has taken root in the socio-political fabric of the regime. Locally known as *gharbzadeh* (Al-i Ahmad 1962) (‘west-toxic’) and ‘Occidentosis’, (Al-i Ahmad 1984), westernization (the emulating of western social and cultural models and manners) has historically been presented as something socially and culturally corrosive to Iranian national identity. A range of visual media, including public art and photography, have been used to propagate the ‘Occidentalist’ ethos (Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000; Varzi 2006; Reshid and Araghi 2008) in the

hope of protecting a pristine Iranian-Islamic cultural identity from what Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran calls the ‘cultural invasion’<sup>15</sup> from the West.

As LGOIT photoblogger stated however, photobloggers cannot acquiesce neither the dogmatic image of the Iranian self propagated at home, in the west about Iran, nor the notion that western cultural influences threaten one’s sense of Iranian identity. As self-consciously globalised Iranians, they demonstrate historical awareness of all of these visual legacies, accessed both in present-day mediated forms (in the streets of major cities, on the Internet) as well as through a kind of ‘postmemory’ (Hirsch 1997; 2012) of post-revolutionary and post-war visual identity politics; in the way that they form ‘memories’ of certain traumatic events mostly through mediated, cultural and semantic forms such as photographs. In light of the tangible presence of this visual history in contemporary Iran and broader, global, indexical conditions in which narratives of Iranian identity are also heavily enmeshed, photobloggers feel the need to “speak up” and present their own, synthesized version of Iran ‘from below’.

### **(Re)-interpreting legacies: visual play and cross-cultural aesthetics**

One strategy photobloggers use to carry out the kind of image work they envision can be seen in their use of (cross-)cultural aesthetics. They use these as a kind of ‘toolbox of art praxis’ (Harris 2012:241) with which to respond, via the aesthetic framing of their photographs, to the existing corpus of image types pertaining to Iran. Figure 4, from LGOIT’s photoblog, offers a good example of this aesthetic framing. Three urban views are combined into a triptych, with a deliberate ambiguity as to the location of the images. On first glance, aesthetic similarities such as rainy or cloudy cityscapes, buildings that look similar and distinctively modern, urban symbolic markers such as lampposts and telephone pylons, suggest to unacquainted viewers that they depict one and the same city. Only the captions below reveal that these are photographs of Berlin, Vienna and Tehran, respectively, referencing LGOIT’s travels in that year (2009) in Europe and Iran.

These visual strategies play with received assumptions of what places, and particularly such a symbolically-loaded place as Iran, ostensibly look like. LGOIT explained to me how in employing such visual strategies, they wished to dispense

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<sup>15</sup> <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2627>



with the notorious visual toolkit of ‘sands, camels and deserts’, known from paradigmatic Orientalist representations of the Middle East, which ‘metonymically freeze’ (Appadurai 1988) Iran as other.



Figure 4

These creative juxtapositions clearly work with the photoblog’s viewers—and may have particular resonance among non-Iranian viewers:

It’s been over two years since I last visited your photoblog. Now, like then, the impression is the same: Tehran looks a lot like my city Bucharest. I could recognise so many things: the old elevator buttons look just like old elevator buttons which used to exist in the buildings from my city...I do believe that somewhere in the past Romania and Iran had good commercial relations.<sup>16</sup>

Other viewers in the thread expressed similar impressions: ‘Had the same feeling’, wrote one. Or, the photoblog may receive many ‘likes’ in the customary online manner of expressing approval. Notably, similar threads unfold on Tehran Live, despite the fact that Amir makes no such attempt to visually juxtapose Tehran with other cities. Regardless, one user commented: ‘I was astonished to see how much like North Vancouver Tehran looks! Now I understand why so many Iranians live in North Vancouver!’<sup>17</sup> These responses suggest that while the visual strategy of juxtaposing Tehran with images (real or mental) of other cities clearly ‘works’, in some cases where it is intended,

<sup>16</sup> Viewer comment, LGOIT Facebook page, posted 19 November 2012

<sup>17</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 11 January 2010

these associations are by no means controlled or determined by the photoblogger.

Images and image arrangements elicit diverse reactions amongst viewers, but they are hardly clear-cut enough as to set apart Iranian versus non-Iranian types of responses. For Iranians living abroad however (whether diasporic or exiled), the notion of what Iran ‘is’ today becomes markedly akin to foreign viewers’ unfamiliar with the country. For them, digital photographs act as emotional and imagined bridges to the country. One Iranian viewer’s comment on Tehran Live summarizes this point: Hello Amir *agha*, (Mr. Amir, or Sir), I love your photoblog, it is such a genius idea. Through the years, the memories have faded and looking at your photoblog is like being reacquainted with your birth city again through photography.<sup>18</sup>

These comments suggest that photoblogs constitute a visual equivalent to what Alinejad (2011) has described in relation to Iranian (non-photography) blogs as a kind of ‘transnational embodiment’, denoting users’ ability to embody real memories of place by fostering feelings of ‘distant closeness’ (Van House 2007) or ‘virtual intimacy’ (Biella 2008). In photoblogs, virtuality and visuality work in tandem to perform new kinds of visual memory work, which (as with any kind of memory work) is always performative, contingent, and heavily dependent on imagination and storytelling (Kuhn 2010). What makes these virtual venues most successful in producing memory is their dependence on photographs, given their status as indexical reflections of visible truths. For diasporic or exiled Iranians, this visual truth—or how Iran ‘really’ looks—becomes ‘experienced’ in the present, mediated through the culturally ‘live’ space and time of the photoblog and the many material aspects of life in Iran that they exhibit.

### **De - exoticization: Visual discourse of the mundane**

Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani had a joke about how in the news you never see Iranians do mundane things. Like you tune in to someone named Mohammad in Tehran making a cookie! That’s what

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<sup>18</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 2 April 2008.

I wanted to do – to show people making cookies! (LGOIT interview March 2012).

Other types of aesthetic practices that photobloggers use to de-exoticize Iran involve turning their lens to mundane objects of everyday life. They do this in order to make a soft, political point about what has historically been “left out of the frame”, namely, the mundane and the ordinary aspects of lived experience. In the three images shown in Figure 5, LGOIT depicts well-known western brands of condiments, including HP sauce and bathroom products, such as Nivea moisturizer, as they can be seen in an average Iranian home, shop or café. In a strategy not dissimilar to the blurring of location encountered in Figure 4, these photographs show objects of everyday life in Iranian settings, where they look much like they would anywhere else in the west. Their visual potency however lies in the implicit commentary they offer in the context of economic sanctions and lack of widespread foreign tourism in Iran. These raise common curiosities abroad, particularly in America where Iran features heavily in political debates, about how Iranians actually ‘live’. In this virtual context, photoblogs foster a digital form of what Sontag (1956) earlier termed an ‘aesthetic tourism’; by which people familiarize themselves with a place, cognitively and visually, through photography





Figure 5

Rather than simply showing these images as visual ‘documents,’ however, LGOIT subtly positions themselves as a cultural broker and as the ‘in between’ they perceive themselves to be, between Iran and an imagined western viewer. Making use of captions, LGOIT anticipates his viewers’ fascination at the presence and widespread availability of such western products such as Coca Cola in Iran, amidst heavy sanctions: ‘I am amazed at how much business both Coke and Pepsi manage to do in Iran through all wars and political sanctions. They’re more powerful than the UN. The Iranian Coke still uses sugar though, which makes it taste better than the corn-syruped American version’.<sup>19</sup> Here LGOIT is a true ‘in between’— it is not only Iran that is subject to their scrutiny, but so is the United States, where Coke is ostensibly less tasty than the Iranian one. LGOIT thus assumes a neutral in-between ground of ‘objective’ judgment, not without a grain of irony. The image of the ‘Iranian coke’ also stands here as a symbolic marker of the ‘Iranian modern’<sup>20</sup>, which these particular photoblogs, as purveyors of the cosmopolitan Iran, in touch with global cultural trends, seek to represent. These kinds of photographs challenge the typical portrait of Iran’s political and cultural isolation by highlighting consumption and lifestyles that are neither specific to the West nor lacking in Iran. Reactions from foreign viewers illustrate that this act of showing mundane objects from everyday life

<sup>19</sup> Caption from LGOIT untitled image, June 2007 archive.

<sup>20</sup> On ‘being modern in Iran’ see Adelpkhah (1999).

is a popular and effective means of making people re-consider what they are routinely told by mainstream media about Iran. One American viewer remarked: 'Thank you for these images, I truly enjoy seeing my "enemy" country in the light of non-politics'.<sup>21</sup> The 'non' politics referred to here equates to the 'hard' issues of 'top-down' political agendas. By subtly occupying what I call a 'third space' (in between western and Iranian national media) of 'soft' or everyday politics, 'from below', photobloggers aesthetically develop historically salient points about the Iranian ordinary, reinstating it (where it has been left out) in the global, cultural frame of imagining Iran. With these types of images, the brute fact of the Iranian ordinary eclipses the extraordinary and the exotic—the basic markers of 'Orientalism' (Said 1978) which have accompanied depictions of Iranians before and since the advent of photography in Iran (Behdad 2001; Dabashi 2008). These findings also modify theoretical understandings of popular online digital photography which claim that 'everyday aesthetics' shown online reflect a move away from capturing 'special moments' traditionally associated with analogue photography (Murray 2008). Iranian photobloggers' use of everyday aesthetics in this narratively-loaded ethnographic context, conversely, make 'special' the everyday by presenting it as a rare commodity for foreign consumption and one that they are eager to sell.

### **Harnessing the socio-technological possibilities of the medium to the 'message'**

Iranian photobloggers carry out a 'local' use of 'global' technologies. They use the self same devices and platforms (mobile phones, the Internet, blogs) as other users from across the globe, but they call on them to perform a very specific kind of cultural work: to show Iran "as it really is". This extends social understandings of online photography from individual 'life chronicling' (Van House 2007: 2721) and narcissistic media usage (Lasch 1991), towards broader forms of public engagement which are taking place in digital contexts. Ehsan, a male photoblogger in his late 20s explained:

Thanks to digital cameras and mobile phones, content producing and publishing is now easier than ever, so it can be a really important way of focusing on social issues or a voice of a neglected people. Everyone can now see what life looks like, even in remote Iranian villages, as well as in the big cities. I want to document the vastness of this culture,

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<sup>21</sup> Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 31/07/12.



the culture of where I grew up, and show it to the world (Ehsan Abbasi interview, October 2012).

Ehsan's remarks reflect the main characteristics of what has been theoretically termed a 'fifth moment' in photography's history (Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012). This 'fifth moment' is characterised by the smart phone (and particularly iPhone) camera's ability to combine in one device what were formerly distinctive, costly and lengthy processes of producing, processing and distributing photographs. Iranian photobloggers celebrate these novel socio-technological potentials, but specifically relate them to an auto-ethnographic attempt at documenting 'life as lived' in Iran. The technical structure of the photoblog also lends itself to this desire to communicate Iran's socio-cultural heterogeneity and present it as a social fact. With the capacity to store and display hundreds or even thousands of digital images, the photoblog is able to show a vast variety of images from the country. Overcoming the representational limits of the physical exhibition context, wherein Mercer (2008) identifies a 'pressure to try and tell the whole story all at once', photoblogs form a digital repository of cultural experiences, memories and aspirations which provide a fertile environment for digital-visual cultural storytelling, with viewers as interactive co-narrators. For these reasons, photoblogging marks a certain ethnographic 'digital-visual moment', in which the digital photograph is becoming central to nascent forms of cultural storytelling practices facilitated by the Internet.<sup>22</sup> This makes possible a popular visual exploration of society that formerly remained within the domains of mainstream media, photojournalism, fine art photography and academic visual anthropology. In their astute socio-technological awareness of digital technologies, image politics in Iran and the ways these can be harnessed for social and cultural uses, photobloggers thus reflect what Cooley has suitably termed 'amateur-professionals' or 'professional-amateurs' (2006), referring more generally to categories blurred by widespread popular usage of digital technologies today.

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<sup>22</sup> For other ethnographic examples see Glowczewski (2005), Vivienne and Burgess (2013) and Were (2013).

## Conclusion

Iranian photoblogs facilitate a discursive process by which Iranians and non-Iranians across the world set about re-envisaging Iran online. While photobloggers' enthusiasm for image-sharing and their deployment of everyday aesthetics parallels a similar process in western digital media practices, it also remains locally specific. In the Iranian context, given both the present socio-political conditions of the Internet, popular photography and historical legacies in which image-making and viewing is embedded, photobloggers' aesthetic discourses have 'local' and 'global' currency. Developing communicative strategies in ways relevant to their generation, their practices mark a certain ethnographic 'digital-visual moment' in Internet-facilitated cultural politics. In this context, digital images, through viewer appropriations, take on social lives of their own, drawing our attention towards nascent forms of online Iranian socio-cultural expression as well as the diverse historical and ethnographic media ecologies in which digital photographs today are enmeshed.

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